

With Helping Hands, Va. Widow Keeps Her Farm

By Ed Bruske
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WOODSTOCK, Va.—Local farmers had seen the arrival of starry-eyed urbanites before—bringing their Volvos, their fancy Jeeps and their brash plans to work the land for fun and profit.

As sure as the Shenandoah River twists through the rock-studded valley, the dreams of city farmers seemed always to wither, leaving great expectations and another failed farm behind.

Bob and Pat Wichser hoped to be an exception to that rule.

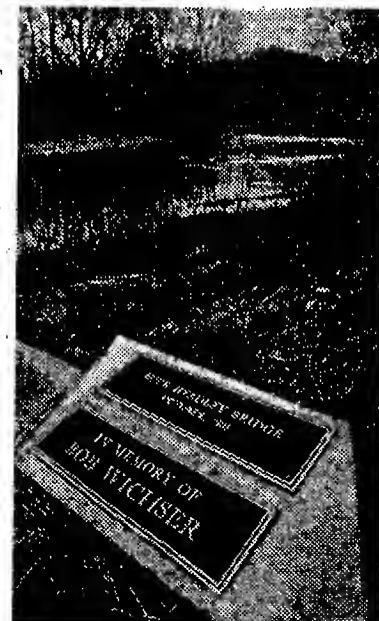
Both high-level congressional aides, the Wichsers quit their jobs on Capitol Hill in the spring of 1985 to raise sheep in the Shen-

andoah foothills 85 miles southwest of Washington.

At first, their plan struck locals as sheer nonsense. And when Bob Wichser, 42, was swept to his death by a flood-swollen river just six months after he and his wife moved here, it seemed to confirm the community's worst fears about well-intentioned transplants who try to carve a living from this unforgiving landscape.

Tragedy has not turned Pat Wichser away. She is still on the land, stubbornly trying to reassemble the pieces of the couple's shattered dream. And she is not alone. Originally skeptical, local farmers have adopted the Wichsers' vision as their own.

See WICHSER, A8, Col. 1



PHOTOS BY MARGARET THOMAS—THE WASHINGTON POST

Pat Wichser has won neighbors' support with her determination to carry on with Shenandoah Valley sheep farm. Right, on bridge to the farm, a plaque memorializes her husband Bob, who died trying to save sheep in 1985 flood.

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Couple Brought Naivete, Perseverance to Va. Farm

WICHSER, From A1

Fired by the sheer will the Wichsers brought to their improbable enterprise, and by 40-year-old Pat Wichser's determination to remain, old hands have formed a bond with the newcomer and have helped her breathe life into her crippled sheep farm.

"People enjoyed watching them, the enthusiasm they had for the work," said Doug French, a dairy farmer and a U.S. Farmers Home Administration area official. "They were showing everybody how to do it."

The Shenandoah Valley's panoramas of thick mountain forests and rolling farm lands captivated the Wichsers years ago when they gazed out their car window from Skyline Drive. Their weekend escapes to the hills took firmer root when, in 1975, they bought their first 40-acre plot along the river just outside Woodstock—the first installment on their dream of leaving the city for good.

Whenever they could break away from the business of Congress, the Wichsers took up hammer and saw to build a small cabin on their isolated property. It was not long before they fell into the company of landowners such as French, who lent an occasional hand.

On the Hill, where each was a top aide to a Republican House member, the Wichsers were almost inseparable. And despite conservative, midwestern upbringings—he the son of a cereal company executive and she the product of a Presbyterian women's college near St. Louis—they seemed always eager for new adventures.

"We had the longest love affair going," Pat Wichser said last week, shortly after the anniversary of her husband's death. "Bob and I were willing to go for broke."

They grew more attached to the country over the years. Still, there was no mistaking where they had come from, and the tales of their misadventures on weekend outings became legend among friends in the Woodstock area.

Some thought it odd, for instance, that Pat Wichser occasionally tilled her garden in her nightgown. But that was nothing compared with the afternoon Bob Wichser came home beaming after bagging what he thought were two wild turkeys.

A skeptical French invited Bob Wichser to bring some of the feathers to the French family's Thanksgiving dinner, and in front of 60 relatives he had Bob Wichser display what everyone else recognized as the remains of a neighbor's two pet roosters.

The Wichsers were unfazed by such minor setbacks, though. And when they learned that a larger farm was for sale at one of the bends in the river, they jumped into their pickup to take a tour.

The Wichsers needed only one look at the 297-acre farm, then overgrown and falling apart, to know they wanted it. They cashed Pat Wichser's retirement fund to make the first payment, and, over a glass of wine one night in May 1980, toasted a secret pact to quit their jobs and move permanently to the farm in five years.

Nearly every weekend, the Wichsers worked feverishly to clear weeds and trash. They strung fences, began building a 6,000 square-foot barn and restored an old wash house into a tidy home, sometimes trudging a quarter mile through waist-deep snow when drifts blocked their truck.

Bob Wichser insisted on doing the most difficult work himself.

"Remember when President Reagan's inauguration was called off because it was too cold?" said Robert Pangle, a real estate broker whose house overlooks the Wichsers' from across the river. "Bob was out there stringing fence."

Bob Wichser believed in surviving off his land. Never having hunted before, he shot woodchucks, muskrats and other rodents for the dinner table.

"Whatever he got, we ate," Pat Wichser said.

Farm friends found some of these exploits quaint, but they sniggered with apprehension at the couple's naivete. Once, while loading 18-foot poplar trunks on the 12-foot bed of their dump truck, Bob Wichser nearly tipped the truck over.

"Bob wasn't a big guy, and sometimes watching what he was doing around the farm, I worried about his health," said friend Gary Madson, an aide to Rep. Cooper Evans (R-Iowa) who grew up on a farm in Spring Valley, Wis. "He didn't know the dangers involved. He didn't know that you could overpower a machine and it would tip over and kill you."

Madson and other friends, here and in Washington, thought the Wichsers were joking in the spring of 1985 when they made their pact public and announced they were quitting the Hill to raise sheep.

"I told them, 'You better go back to Washington and make some money at a good job,'" said William A. Truban, a local veterinarian and Republican minority leader in the Virginia state Senate.

In fact, few landowners in the valley farm full time. Most have

See WICHSER, A9, Col. 1

Shenandoah Community Rallies to Keep Shattered Dream Alive

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WICHSER, From A8

jobs in local factories or businesses. But the Wichsers plowed ahead. "We knew that the odds were against us," Pat Wichser said. "But that made it exciting."

Ned Conklin, the local agricultural extension service agent, steered the couple toward sheep farming, and the Wichsers traveled as far as Canada to build up a herd of pure-bred Finnish Landrace that put them on the cutting edge of Virginia's budding sheep industry.

It was Nov. 4 last year, when Bob Wichser and his father were installing the roof on the farm's new sheep barn, that steady rains washed out of the mountains and the Shenandoah began to swell. It would become the worst flood since 1942.

That afternoon, water spilled over the river bank and stranded the Wichsers' sheep in a lower pasture. Unable to drive them out, the couple fetched their plastic canoe and began ferrying the sheep to safety.

It was well into the night when Pat Wichser grabbed the last sheep, but it was too late. The rising waters suddenly turned into a torrent that swept the canoe downstream. Pat Wichser remembers her husband shouting, "Let the sheep go! Let everything go!" The canoe capsized, spilling them into the raging waters.

Pat Wichser, who managed to grab a tree and was later rescued by her father-in-law, watched helplessly as her husband floated by in the dark. His body was found four days later, 18 miles downstream.

Local farmers reacted with sympathy and disbelief. "He didn't know his animal and he didn't know the river," said Marion Artz, 72, who owns 100 sheep upstream.

"I kick myself to this day for not calling them and telling them to



Pat Wichser talks with Doug French, one of many in Shenandoah Valley who have aided her since her husband's death.

birth to twins, and the rest were expected to deliver in the next two months.

Pat Wichser was in a panic. Her husband had made most of the decisions on the farm, and she hardly knew how to get fuel into the tractor and other machinery.

"I was scared. I didn't know how much help I was going to have," Pat Wichser said. "I couldn't handle lambing alone. I thought I would buy myself time to figure what to do." And so she sold all but 13 ewes and three rams from the flock.

The French family helped to finish building a shed for the small flock just before the deliveries began. By February, Pat Wichser was

up every four hours tending the lambs that came in quick succession: 12 in all, with four sets of twins and one group of triplets.

It was not until spring that the full weight of her husband's death came crashing in. "I didn't think life was worth it without Bob," Pat Wichser said. So she briefly left the farm behind and visited relatives.

Shortly after she returned, things took a dramatic turn for the better as help arrived in a flurry.

"In the Shenandoah Valley, nobody goes to bed cold or hungry if they're willing to tell a neighbor," said veterinarian Truban. "Somebody's watching out all the time. This neighborly goodness is still here."

But there was more to the community's outpouring than simple kindness. It was as if the Wichsers' determination to farm full time had stirred ancient feelings of kinship with the land, feelings that many here believe are slowly being lost to the developer's shovel.

Doug French and his sons arrived to string 1,200 feet of wire fence. A Methodist men's group chopped firewood.

Farmer Newell Irwin fenced off a new sheep corral, and neighbor Buck Headley brought his backhoe

and laid new water and electrical lines.

"It was the most fantastic thing," Headley said. "It was something beyond anybody's belief that [the Wichsers] could come down here and make this farm work. One of my great disappointments was not to find out how [Bob] would have done it."

Paul Miley, once just another stranger from downstream, came in with the meat manager from the local Safeway, finished nailing the siding on the sheep barn and then offered to help manage the farm.

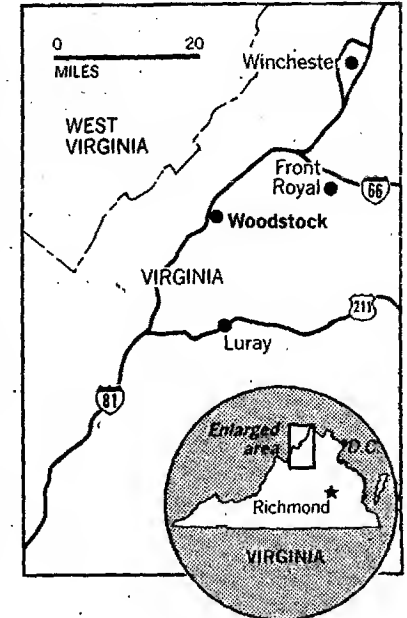
"I think if any other woman had gone through what she'd gone through, she'd probably have sold the place, thrown her hands up and gone back to the city," Miley said.

But Pat Wichser, now rarely alone, said she never considered leaving. She turned down her parents' invitation to return to her childhood home in Quincy, Ill., and instead took a course in lambing.

Miley taught her how to pump diesel fuel, and together they harvested a barn full of hay this fall, with Pat Wichser at the wheel of the tractor. In fact, Wichser was one of the few farmers in the area with feed enough to sell after this year's drought. She bought several more sheep, bringing the number in her herd to 45.

Each morning now she rises before dawn, pulls on her parka and rubber boots and hauls bales of hay and alfalfa out to her bleating sheep. The cold bite of approaching winter leaves a layer of ice over the water troughs, and Wichser knocks them clear to pour a refill.

Again this winter she expects to spend her nights bottle-feeding



BY LARRY FOGEL - THE WASHINGTON POST

newborn lambs. She hopes to build the flock up to 100 next year, and Miley is pushing to add cattle.

Even with her newly found help, Wichser faces odds greater than those she fought with her husband. But her taste for the land has not turned bitter.

"My husband was a very upbeat person," Wichser said. "He would have said, 'Okay, kiddo. My father saved your life. Now don't screw up.' I couldn't lose him and all he'd been working for all at one time."

"The last thing I would want to do is end up hating the river. That's what made us come out here, what made us want to live in the country," she said. "What killed my husband is not the river you see now. The river that took him came from the outside. It came in the night."

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